

**Lt. Gen. Alexis G. Grynkewich**  
**Commander, Air Forces US Central Command**

**Defense Writers Group**  
**Project for Media and National Security**  
**George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs**

**4 October 2023**

**Moderator:** Good morning, everybody, and welcome everyone to this Defense Writers Group with Lt. General Alexis G. Grynkewich, as you know, of course, Commander of Air Forces US Central Command.

The ground rules as always, this is on the record,. Please feel free to record for accuracy but there's no rebroadcast of audio or video today.

The General brings the furthest distance traveled to the DWG award this year, so rather than my opening question I'm going to ask him to kind of set the scene, some shaping thoughts, then we'll go around the table for questions. Ten of you emailed in advance, we'll do that list first, then given time, whoever's left.

So General, we are honored to have you. Thank you for being here. The floor is yours.

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Great, thanks Thom, and thanks everyone for being here this morning. I'll be brief in my opening comments so we can get the conversation where you all want to take it. Just a couple of things.

First is I'm excited because we're coming up on the one-year anniversary of the standup of something we call Task Force 99 which is one of our operational innovation task forces. It nets very well with DepSecDef Hicks' Replicator effort that she announced recently. Basically Task Force 99 takes visual and unmanned technologies and is trying to apply them in an operational environment. We do quick assessments and then use them in the field.

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing  
(801) 556-7255

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

We've got either on-order or on-hand now 98 different UASes across 13 types with ranges from 20 kilometers out to 900 miles. They can do a variety of things from ISR to potential uses for attack and things of that nature. So it's exciting to me to see the department focusing on this and I think we've got a role to play in advancing that technology and kind of looking at the changes of warfare.

A second thing I wanted to say, the Middle East remains very important from my perspective. Of course I'm shaded by where I sit, but we see it as not just a place where we're trying to keep threats to the homeland like ISIS at bay or deter Iran as a persistent threat, if you will. But it's also very fertile ground for strategic competition with China and Russia.

Just over the past couple of weeks I've gone on a couple of trips in the region, visiting some of our most important and longest standing allies. I went to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and to Abu Dhabi and UAE and spent time with military leaders there. I'll tell you, the tenor of the mil-to-mil relationship remains extremely strong and again, I think that's a testament to the importance the United States places on the region and certainly the importance that CENTCOM and AFCENT have placed on engagement in the region and focusing on our partners. So I'm happy to talk about visits to each of those countries as well.

But I'll leave it at that and be happy to take questions and go where you guys want to go.

**Moderator:** Great, General. Thank you for those great opening comments.

First from the floor is Lara Seligman of Politico.

**DWG:** Thanks for doing this. I was wondering if you'd tell us a little bit about the situation in the Persian Gulf right now and what are the impacts of the deployment of the A-10 and the F-35?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

Has that caused any impact on Iran, Iran's behavior in the region?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I think it has. We've had A-10s in the region for a while and we had F-35s that came into the region to increase our capacity in the face of a threat to the maritime shipping from the Iranians. What the F-35s did is they gave us additional capacity. Now we're supporting the naval forces central, we have the ability to continue doing the missions we were doing up in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere in the region and increase what we were doing in support of the Navy doing basically combat air patrols over the Straits of Hormuz.

What I would say is our increased air presence, but probably more importantly the increased presence of surface vessels that went in, including the Amphibious Ready Group that came in from the Marines, that increase in surface vessels combined with our air power has deterred Iran from taking any actions against maritime shipping.

My view is that deterrence is temporal. I don't know if they see a change in that posture how they will react. But my sense is and what we're trying to message is look, we've surged forces in in response to a specific threat. That shows American commitment to the region, it shows that our American strategy has been with our posture being less than it once was, we've shown a commitment to bring forces in for either major exercises for assurance purposes or when a threat required it, and we certainly did that in this case.

So even as these forces go back, they were temporary in the case of the F-35s in particular, then if Iran thinks that's an opening the United States is absolutely willing to come back in and surge forces one more time.

So my hope is that they've seen that message and that they remain deterred over the longer term, but it has had good effects in the meantime.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**DWG:** Shifting to [inaudible] a little bit, can you talk about the status in Syria? [Inaudible] intercepting US pilots over those skies. And are those [inaudible]?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Absolutely. The Russian activity in terms of the pace of the activity has remained relatively constant, maybe even decreased slightly, but more or less constant. Probably not statistically significant. They do continue to fly into places like the air space over Al-Tanf Garrison. They do continue to intercept our MQ-9s. But I would say that we've seen some favorable shifts in behavior over the last month that are broadly deescalatory. So in the past I would have told you that I was very concerned about Russian air-to-ground aircraft armed with air-to-ground weapons, flying directly over our forces. That's very rare and in fact hasn't happened for several weeks. They still fly in the airspace but not directly overhead our forces. So I welcome that shift in behavior.

And the if we go back to I think it was early July when we had some of the flares being dropped on our MQ-9s, we don't see that behavior anymore. So they'll still intercept our MQ-9s but their behavior is safe. I still would characterize it as unprofessional because it is in violation of kind of our agreed-upon rules of the road that we have, but it is safe behavior now, and again I welcome that change.

**Moderator:** Thanks. Next is Chris Gordon of Air and Space Forces Magazine.

**DWG:** Thank you, sir, for doing this.

A question on Task Force 99. Does Task Force 99 have an operational capability that has been used? And if so, when, how, and for what? And could you expand upon the attack capability you mentioned? Do you envision having a [inaudible] capability? Would that be something -- what's the scenario in which that would be used?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** For context, I've broadly given Task Force 99 three main problems to look at. One of them is increasing our air domain awareness, which basically means our ability to sense the things that affect our ability to operate in the air, whether that's surface-to-air missiles or airplanes that are flying through the air, but that sort of thing.

Number two is to help us figure out how we can find hard targets. So kind of an intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance type mission. And the third is, I call it imposing dilemmas on the adversary. That could include being used for one-way kinetic attack, the kamikaze drones that have been used against us. That is certainly something that we're looking at. In a way these are just low, slow cruise missiles with different payloads, so we're looking at that as options, but it also could include something that can do spectrum warfare, something that just harasses the adversary, et cetera. So there's a number of different things that we're looking at.

We've not fully fleshed out the concepts of operation for the latter imposing dilemmas, but we're working on them.

As far as things that they have done. So they do have an operational mission. That's one key thing. This isn't an innovation element in terms of just a hub for innovation or something like that. This is an operational task force that's fueled by innovation. So they have an operational mission from me.

We have used them. We've used them for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions. I won't get into the when and where due to classification issues, but I will say that we have used them for ISR and they've proven capable. So just as a way to think about it. If we use a traditional MQ-9 asset for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, a great capability, highly developed over the years. But there's some limitations. Cloud decks below it become a problem. We can't

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

see through the clouds necessarily.

Using smaller, more bespoke capabilities that fly lower and under the weather, we've been able to use high resolution cameras and get information on things that might be a threat to us. So that's one use case that we've really started to flesh out. And one that we are proposing again to DepSecDef Hicks for those Replicators. We've got this capability that we've used. We've proven it's got some utility. Let's now see how does it scale.

**DWG:** And a follow-up on the [inaudible] warfare [inaudible] capabilities. When you said looking at, just to clarify. Are those things you have currently or just things that might be available for you in the future?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I won't get into the specifics of exactly every type of drone that we've had, but I'll give you one example of kind of the adaptability that allows us to "look at this". We have a new 3D printed drone that we have created. We call it the Kestrel. We can make this thing for about \$2500. It can go roughly 100 kilometers, so not a huge range, but something that can be relevant on the battlefield, and it costs 2500 bucks to make. \$2500. That includes all the avionics.

What it doesn't include is the payload. So it can carry about a three kilogram payload plus or minus. That payload could be any number of things that you put in it. So that gives us some optionality with platforms to think about how we might use them.

**Moderator:** Next is Eric Schmitt of the New York Times.

**DWG:** Good morning, General. A couple of questions.

First, can you give us kind of your assessment right now of Wagner Group presence in Syria? Are the numbers up or down post Prigozhin? What's the relationship with other Russian forces in Syria?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** What I have seen is a relatively steady number of Wagner forces in Syria throughout the past several months including through the Prigozhin incident, if you will.

**DWG:** About how many would that be?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** It's a few hundred. I'll just leave it at that. But it's a few hundred.

They operate in most cases in relatively close proximity to the Russians. Certainly as the Wagner rebellion was ongoing we saw some tensions between those forces, come assertions of control by the Russians, in other words going and finding the leaders of Wagner and going hey, you're working for me now. Let's not expand this conflict here.

In the wake of that it seems to have settled out. That relationship appears to be sustaining where I would say the Russian forces on the ground, to me, what it appears is they certainly continue to operate in close proximity. They've asserted their level of control over those forces. But it's not perfect control. The way I'd characterize it is they want the ability to give Wagner missions and tell them what to do, but they're not controlling them tactically, everything that happens with the exception of how they behave in close proximity on the same base and those sorts of kind of administration things.

I don't see any major changes coming from that. It appears to me that they've reached some sort of détente or understanding between the two of them and they'll continue operating side by side for a while.

**DWG:** I wanted to ask you about tensions between the UAE and the Saudis, specifically in Yemen where it appears that both countries are developing their own proxy forces there in the wake of the war on the ground. What's your assessment of that, and how to make that [inaudible] stability in that region?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** With my travels to Saudi Arabia and UAE, of course, Yemen comes up both because of the air threat that can and has emanated from Yemen toward both of those countries in the past. And I would say rather than focus on the differences between them and the approach, what I see is more and more kind of a convergence of an understanding that peace in Yemen is actually good for everyone. Certainly good for the people of Yemen. If you talk to any of the leaders in UAE or in Saudi Arabia, they all recognize that the civil war in Yemen has been a humanitarian tragedy and they're all committed to trying to end that.

So I think as peace talks have progressed and the search for this durable peace that goes beyond the ceasefire, I've seen the sides come closer together in terms of what their vision is. There's still certainly disparate interests on the ground. We have our interests that are primarily CT related and from a military perspective, if you will, and certainly UAE and Saudi Arabia have interests that differ slightly, but I think broadly speaking, they both see the value and the commitment to getting that enduring peace.

**DWG:** Are they backing different proxy forces at this point that could undermine that overall peace agreement?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I can't speak to the level of support that they're giving to various groups in Yemen, but I don't see a danger of any of those actions undermining the durable peace. I see more of a danger of undermining a durable peace frankly coming from Iran. So Iran has continued to supply the Houthis during this ceasefire with lethal aid. The Houthis, of course, have continued to remain in very substantial combat with the [Roig] forces and that I think is a much bigger threat to that durable peace than anything that our partners are doing.

**Moderator:** The next question is Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal.



Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**DWG:** Sir, there have been no attacks on US forces in the Middle East by militias since March when a contractor was killed in Syria. Is Iran continuing to send arms to militia groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen? What types of weapons are being provided if they are being provided? And to which groups? If that's happening, what's your sense of why is that? And I have a quick follow-up.

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** As I mentioned with respect to the Houthis, there certainly is weaponry that's continued to be provided to them. We see the same thing to the militias across Iraq and Syria. It's difficult for me to precisely characterize the volume of these transfers, but we see the transfers happening. We see them happening kind of across the broad sweep of weaponry that they've provided in the past. So that's UAVs, shorter close range missiles. Obviously the whole panoply of small arms, rockets, et cetera at the lower end.

We also see continued training and advising and assisting going on from Kudz force operatives to these groups.

So the way I would characterize it is, why are the Iranians doing this? The Iranians have built a threat network or a network of proxy forces and that is an asymmetric advantage to them. They're really got two asymmetric capabilities that they use to try to coerce and control the region to bend to their will, and that's their ballistic missile force with the thousands of ballistic missiles that they have, and this proxy and partner network which is a big concern of our allies because the Iranians can activate it at any time, and based on where it's arrayed from south in Yemen to across the Levant, it presents really a 360 degree threat to many of our partners in the region.

Iran likes being able to present that threat. They like being able to coerce other countries in the region. They haven't activated the network of late against US forces. I think part

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

of that is deterrence that we reestablished after the attack in March when we responded quickly and forcefully. But I also think part of that is an Iranian assessment that that would go contrary to kind of their diplomatic outreach initiatives that are ongoing, trying to portray themselves as a responsible partner. But no doubt in my mind that most of our partners continue to see the risk that's associated with what Iran's doing in the back room.

**DWG:** To follow up, there have been some serious tensions and skirmishing between Arab tribes and Syria and the Kurdish-led SDF in recent weeks. Why is that happening? Is this hampering the counter-ISIS efforts in Syria? What is the US doing about it?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Good question.

Those tribal uprisings have been a concern. There is a history of friction between the Kurdish elements of the SDF and the Arab tribes that is better or worse over the last many years that the SDF has been present in that area.

My sense is there's always an opportunity for someone to insert a wedge into the boundary between those Arab elements of the SDF and the Kurdish elements of the SDF. What I would tell you is I see that these are, while there are valid grievances that the Arab tribes might have, there are people who are applying accelerants to that as they try to displace US influence in the region. They do that by trying to displace SDF influence which, as you know, is our partner on the ground.

So Iran has an interest in doing that. Russia has an interest in doing that. The Syrian regime has an interest in doing that. My assessment is that various groups associated with those actors are providing an accelerant and inciting these groups to act when under normal conditions they might not. They might resolve what their grievances are peacefully.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Moderator:** Next is Courtney Kube, NBC.

**DWG:** Sorry I'm late. If you covered this already just ignore my question.

On Iran continuing to provide some of these groups with weapons, so basically for the last six or seven months they've been stockpiling, groups like [Cage], I'm assuming and [inaudible]. To what end? And is there -- Do you have any sense of what could cause them to start [inaudible] against [inaudible]?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I think to what end is, it's difficult to answer. I'm not sure that there's a specific end that they have in mind. They have partnerships, deep partnerships with these groups, and I think it's just a manifestation of that partnership that hey, we've kind of always supplied you with stuff, and advising, and so we're continuing to do that.

I don't see it as a discontinuity from the past, I just see it as a continuation of what they've done over the last several years as they've built up these militias since they were stood up.

As to what might cause militias to act against the United States, we had a strategic dialogue with the Iraqis where we talked about what are the conditions under which our presence might be adjusted in the future. Prime Minister Sudani was a big part of that. He's balancing a number of different factors.

I think the question in my mind is to what degree are the militias and to what degree is Iran as the power behind the militias satisfied with what came out of that and where it's going. If there is a level of dissatisfaction or they start to perceive the coalition as disingenuous or focusing on things other than defeating ISIS, that would be something that I think could spur them to action. Right now I don't see any sign of that. I think the militias are being held back in check. Again, I think some of that's deterrence that was reestablished

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

back in March, and I think some of it's just an assessment. But again, it doesn't suit their political ends right now to resort to violence.

There's no doubt in my military mind, at least, that they would resort to that at some point in the future if they saw it as in their interest.

**DWG:** So essentially they've just been building and getting stronger over these last six or seven months or longer now. Is it fair, are some of these militia groups like the Houthis, are they stronger now than they were even before the deterrence was reestablished?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** In terms of numbers -- if we were just counting weapons and what not, yeah, they've got more weapons than they had three or four months ago because over three or four months some amount of weaponry has come in. Again, it's difficult for me to characterize the volume, but some amount of weaponry has come in.

It is a concern of mine that the militias over the years have continued to get stronger and that gives them more and more sway in Iraq, and frankly I see that as in the long term a real threat to Iraqi sovereignty that will need to be addressed and some sort of reconciliation is going to be required. But that's something for the Iraqis to address.

**Moderator:** Next is Jeff Seldin of VOA.

**DWG:** Thanks very much for doing this.

You mentioned that the tensions right now between the [inaudible]. You've also seen tensions between the SDF [inaudible], and Turkey learning to do more stuff. And there also seems to be a bit of a schism between the US and the SDF where a helicopter raid that the US conducted last week, SDF said it was a joint operation, the US has said it wasn't.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

With that and the other factors with the Russian troops and some of the [inaudible], how tenuous are the gains that have been made against ISIS right now? How easily could that fall apart? And is ISIS in a position where if things do start to go badly it does have the potential to resurge despite some of what we heard from politicians which is that ISIS is not really something to worry about?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I would say under the current status quo ISIS probably isn't something to worry about. We've got them down, visually I think of them being on the ground and we've got our boot on their neck, if you will. So they're not in a position, ISIS in Syria, they're not in a position to take significant action against us. But there's a number of us that could change that.

They do have a fair number of cells. They've got a few senior leaders. They've got a few training camps that are beyond the area where coalition forces routinely operate. My pitch to the Russians and to others who do operate in those areas is, instead of coming into Al-Tanf Garrison and trying to assert that that airspace is not where the coalition operates may be out of focus on ISIS. So that's kind of point one, is there does need to be some effort against ISIS by other actors who are there purportedly to do that. Just to keep pressure on those cells and keep them on the ground with our boot on their neck, if you will.

Second there are two other places at risk that CENTCOM talks about all the time and I couldn't agree more with them. The first is there's a caliphate in detention. There's a number of prisons across Northeast Syria where ISIS fighters have been held really since the fall of Baghuz in March of 2019, and those prisons need to remain secure, those fighters need to remain detained. And certainly as we saw about a year, year and a half ago, there are designs to spring those fighters free from time to time. That's a real element of risk when you've got roughly

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

10,000 ISIS prisoners, a division's worth of combat power in those prisons that could be freed if we don't keep them secure. So that's an element of risk.

The other one that we've made really good progress on but we need to continue to focus on are in the IDP camps. Like Al-Hol being kind of the poster child for that. In Al-Hol, the number of children that are being raised by families associated with ISIS that are being taught to sing ISIS songs and salute the ISIS flag, if you will, is concerning to me. What I see there is a real need for countries to repatriate folks out of those IDP camps to get them reintegrated back into society so we're not dealing with the next generation of ISIS 10 or 15 years from now.

So I think there are real elements of risk where things could resurge at some point in the future, but we've got ISIS in a good spot right now, at least in Syria.

**DWG:** You mentioned earlier China, that gets involved in [inaudible]. Can you be more specific about what you're seeing from China, what they're trying to accomplish and how the competition with China is shaping up in that region?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** China sees the Middle East as a very important area of the world, and what I would point to is roughly 50 percent of the oil imports that China, roughly 50 percent of the oil that China imports comes from the Gulf region. Thirty-three or so percent of the natural gas. So they are dependent on Middle Eastern hydrocarbons. So that interest in needing those hydrocarbons to drive their economy and the economy that drives their military development makes the Middle East an important region to them.

Also through things like their Belt and Road Initiative they're trying to get assured access, if you will, to shipping lanes that allow them to trade with the markets of Europe, and frankly, to access the continent of Africa and some of the

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

natural resources, rare earth minerals and what not that exist there.

So China thinks the Middle East is important and they're trying to, in my view, displace our influence. They're primarily doing that through economic means and through the Belt and Road Initiative, trying to offer infrastructure projects, trying to offer in some cases foreign military sales or their equivalent of that, selling military hardware, but it's primarily an economic pathway.

What I think is a reasonable assertion though, is that where economic interests start, military interests will follow to protect those economic interests. So over time I think there is a risk that Chinese expansion into the region militarily could happen.

In the shorter term, if relations with China proceed to a point where they displace US relations, then you start to see challenges, I would argue, with things like access basing and overflight in the region that could be critical not just for things that happen in the Middle East, but things that would happen in the Indo-Pacific in the future.

Our focus is on securing the military dimension of the US relationship with these countries, so that that Chinese influence remains displaced.

We have a number of concerns that could cause our military influence to be displaced. One that we talk about regularly are things like smart cities put together by Huawei. If that kind of infrastructure comes in and it starts to touch networks, now you start to see a risk to US forces and US technical capabilities because of the collection capabilities that might come with that.

We do watch that closely. We message that very forthrightly to our partners. They all understand that and I think they are

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

making individual decisions about how to pursue their economic interests with China. I mean we've got economic interests with China, so I don't begrudge them that whatsoever, but we're trying to keep that isolated and out of the military dimension.

**DWG:** But no signs of a Chinese military footprint this year?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I think it's no secret that there is a Chinese military footprint very close over in Djibouti. We watch that closely. The Chinese have been in the region doing counter-piracy for a long time.

What I would tell you is to the extent that there are mil-to-mil relationships with China in the region they're very transactional. So what I emphasize to our partners is when you work with the Chinese, you're getting a transaction that happens. When you're working with the US we've got deep strategic partnerships that are based on shared interests, it's based on working together in major non-NATO ally status in many cases. These are deep strategic partnerships as opposed to just transactional relationships.

So I think the Chinese -- here's another example. The Chinese have had a maritime presence in the region for a long time. When was the last time the Chinese used their military presence to do something like intercept lethal aid going to the Houthis? They've never done it. They've never done something like that that assists our partners with what for UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular was one of their biggest threats over the last many years.

So I use that as an example when I talk to our partners about our commitment to their security in a non-transactional way. Our commitment to the partnership while the Chinese are -- I urge them to look at them with a grain of salt or askance as they come in and make their offers.

**Moderator:** Next is Mike Brest with the Washington Examiner.



Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**DWG:** Good morning. A follow up on Jeff's question. Can you give your sense on the terror threat in Afghanistan? And after two years of reliance solely on over the horizon capabilities, is that enough? And what are you seeing from ISIS-K as well as [inaudible]?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Good questions. I think General [Crowell] has testified to this, and my assessment is consistent with what he said publicly which is would we like to see more? Absolutely. Do we think we see a lot that's going on and can make some broad assessments about the contours of ISIS-K? Yes. Do we have the touch of everything that's going on? Not necessarily.

So I think there has been an increase in risk. I think it is likely that ISIS-K has the desire and in some cases the capability to do external operations. We've seen some of that regionally. I don't think there is a threat beyond the reason right now, but ISIS-K certainly has aspirations to go farther. They're likely one of the most capable elements of ISIS right now and something that we need to keep a close eye on.

We've got a good feel overall of what their capabilities are. But again, you always want more. Right?

**DWG:** What are worst-case scenarios short term as the US doesn't have sort of the feel and touch of everything that's going on? Can you talk a little bit about what you expect to see in the short term?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** It's difficult to deal in hypotheticals for me, because there will be actions that we take as we see things start to change. So we would adjust our collection posture as we started to see that things became more and more of a concern. So I'm not sure that I can deal in kind of a worst case scenario, but I would say I think it is concerning to me that we've seen a couple of attacks in Pakistan that ISIS-K has

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

claimed responsibility for. I think even internal to Afghanistan they've been more active.

So those are kind of the indicators that we look for that they might be building a more advanced capability and that then leads to decisions both at the CENTCOM and AFCENT level and internal to the overall Central Command components. But it also would lead to some national decisions about what the priority needs to be. I can't presume what those decisions would be, but I do think that everyone recognizes that there is a nascent threat there that could spring up and we'd take appropriate action to intervene before we got to a worst case scenario.

**Moderator:** Next is Jim Garamone of Defense News.

**DWG:** I'd like to go back to the China question. It's sort of fascinating. The Secretary has said many times that we're not asking allies and partners to choose sides, and yet -- and the Chinese have exercised with many of the people in the Central Command area of responsibility. But that would change your exercise program if in fact the Chinese had a larger presence with these partners and allies, wouldn't it? You couldn't share intelligence the same way, you couldn't hold the same sort of exercises.

Have you discussed that with the allies and partners?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Absolutely. I think where you're going is consistent with the messaging that we share. So everyone knows that the United States is in the strategic competition with China. Everyone in the region understands that. We don't want to force them to pick a side but we want to maintain the partnerships that we have. To the extent that there's Chinese presence either in the IT systems or Chinese physical presence of some sort, that does start to challenge our ability to have forces stationed in a region to do exercises, to have intelligence sharing agreements, et cetera.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

So all of that is very clearly messaged to our partners. And what I would tell you is, partly they respond in the way that we would hope they would, which is they recognize that the value that we bring to the relationship and the partnership is much more substantial than what the Chinese might bring.

You talked about exercises, there have been exercises that countries in the region have participated in with China, and I've been asked about some of them and I go look, they do one exercise with China, we do 15 or 20 with that country. So do I see that as overly concerning at this point? No. It obviously depends on where the exercise is, what forces are involved and those sorts of things. But broadly speaking, I don't see that as a major component of risk to our military relationship right now.

**DWG:** If I can just sort of turn this a little bit, for the last 20 years CENTCOM has been at war and [inaudible] of the Department of Defense. Getting all the money they needed, all the troops they needed. You're in a conservation of [inaudible] now. How does that change things?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** There's all sorts of funny comments I could make here, but I probably shouldn't do it on the record. [Laughter].

I was going to say something like well CENTCOM should still be the top dog but that's not a real answer.

The real answer is, CENTCOM recognizes, we all recognize, we're in CENTCOM but we're military officers to the United States of American first. And we realize that the long term existential threat is to the rules-based international order and the challenge that China poses to that rules-based international order.

We hope that we don't ever get to the point of conflict with China, which is why competition right now is so important to

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

really meter how we're competing with them appropriately. That competition by definition in a world where resources are limited requires a reallocation of focus, it requires not just money shifting but it requires brain power shifting to other problems.

So we are constantly looking for ways to sustain what we need to sustain in CENTCOM to stay on the National Defense Strategy path.

So here's kind of how I think about it. If you want to distract the United States of America from focusing on that long term existential threat, a terrorist attack on our homeland could certainly do that. So our job at CENTCOM and at AFCENT is to continue to maintain adequate pressure on groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS so that they can't do that so we remain focused. There's some level of resourcing that needs to go with that and we've got to make risk decisions and the government of the United States has to make risk decisions about how much to apply.

If you want to distract us even more broadly, a war with Iran would do that. Right? That would be catastrophic to the long term focus on China.

So we're not looking for conflict with Iran. We're looking to deter that conflict, keep things deescalated, and so by bringing a few forces in to deescalate in a maritime domain, we can avoid worse outcomes later. So we're constantly thinking about metering the presence and our approach in the region to do that.

Then of course there's just the competition that we've been talking about, the day to day. What exercises are we doing? Who's buying what weapons from whom? All those sorts of things.

General Kurilla focuses on people, partners and innovation and partners are a big part of that. The relationships that we have. We spend a lot of time in the region, even though my headquarters is in South Carolina and his is in Tampa, and

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

ARCENT's is in South Carolina right besides us. We're forward in the region more than half the time, building those partnerships, tending the garden, talking to our partners about what their needs and requirements are so that we can support them, and trying to stitch together regional architectures for missile defense and things of that nature.

So I think even though we're not the place where all the money and all the people are going anymore, that's really a good thing. Our job is to figure out how do we maintain the missions that we need to maintain to allow the NDS to proceed unabated and to do that with the most reasonable amount of resources that mitigate the risk as we can.

**Moderator:** General, I gave up my first question because Jim told me he was going to ask it. That was mine.

I do want to use the power of the chair to ask a second piece of that. Not just the flow of money for 20 year went to CENTCOM, but for most of those years when the CT focus was all of our national security the Air Force was a supporting force to ground forces on the ground.

How has that changed and how is that affecting what you're doing in your region? And how do you see it reshaping the Air Force?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** That's a really good question and this might get a little wonky, so I'll try to speak in really plain English terms.

You're right. For the past many years US Air Force airmen who have been deployed to the Middle East have responded when the Army or when Special Operations Forces call for fires. They go we need airplanes overhead at this location to provide close air support, or to do this strike on ISIS, but we were not thinking about the independent application of air power to solve that problem because we're not really the appropriate tool to do that independently, right So you need special operators, you need

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

forces on the ground who are going to go into an area, clear the area, et cetera.

What that has done, I would argue, over 20 years has put us in a position where we are in need of a mindset shift to think again about how does the Air Force really contribute to major -- we need to think about major combat operations and we need to think about how the Air Force can contribute to those joint operations that are going to have a defeat mechanism against whoever that adversary is.

That's a very different mindset than -- this is a little bit of hyperbole -- but than sitting around waiting for someone to call you to come and help. You are now thinking about I've been given a problem. I've been given the Iran problem. I've been given the Taiwan Straits problem. I've been given the whatever problem. How do I think about applying the tools of air power to solve that problem independently? In conjunction with the Joint Force as opposed to waiting for someone to call me with what the solution is and how my F-16 fits into that.

So I think as AFCENT is making that shift -- so we're certainly still supporting forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria. We're happy to be a supporting component to OIR. But if there was a broader regional conflict in any direction in many cases we would be the supported commander and it would be others who were doing things that help enable our operations. That's a different mindset for most of the airmen who were assigned over there who have come back over the years.

**Moderator:** Thanks. Wonky, yes, but very, very interesting. I appreciate your time.

Next is Laura Heckmann of National Defense Magazine.

**DWG:** I'm wondering if you can talk about what AFCENT is doing via testing or [inaudible] or development for counter-UAS technology.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** There's a couple of things. The US Army is the executive agent for most counter-UAS work but we have a fairly big role in working with them on it, not maybe as AFCENT but in my role as the area air defense commander. So again, to get a little wonky in doctrine, I'm not just the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force Commander and the AFCENT Commander and the Combined Forces Air Component Commander which means the joint and coalition air commander, but I also have this air defense role.

So operationally when Patriots and counter-UAS capabilities come in there we have a role in defining where the line's going to be, how we're going to engage. Doctrinally it's space because if there's an air threat coming from some direction we have to orchestrate, okay, an airplane's going to go try to shoot it down. If that can't do it, then a Patriot is going to try to shoot it. If that can't do it then maybe the base defense is going to do it with say a CRAM gun or something like that. So we have to set kind of what those rules are in that deconfliction.

So a few things that we've done. The first is at the base level we've created a new base command center architecture that is trying to integrate the command and control of a number of different counter-UAS systems that exist. So there's been a ton of activity trying to build systems that can shoot down smaller UASes. The problem is none of them talk to each other. So one of the big gaps we saw is that command and control architecture that links things together. So we've got technical solutions, we've got tactics, techniques and procedures, and both these command centers that can do this.

In many cases it's not just airmen in those command centers, but it's soldiers sitting side by side with us. So we work a lot on the tactical side, the operational side on how do we integrate those different capabilities? Whether it's a directed energy or a kinetic kill capability to bring them together.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

Then we work on that deconfliction from that base defense zone to okay, when would we direct the Patriots to engage or the THAAD to engage or a fighter to go out and engage?

That's been a big part of our effort.

We've also looked and started an investment a couple of years ago, I can't take credit for it. But if you remember back in 2019 when the attacks on Lake Abqaiq and Saudi Aramco happened, one of the things that came out afterwards, you all may remember, but there was a Kuwaiti Falconer who was in the desert and had some video of the drone as it was going across Kuwait. And someone at the time goes man, wouldn't it be neat if we could use that as a crowd source detection capability? As opposed to the Pentagon radars to find this thing.

So we've been working over the past several years with MITRE to develop an app that goes on your phone called Karpe Drone, cease the drone. [Laughter]. And that app has the ability to be a crowd source detection tool. So someone who's wandering around who had this app on their phone could take a picture of the drone and then an alert would go out to people in the area that the drone was there. There's some AI on the back end that can help identify what the drone is. They can build track files if enough people take pictures of it. So we now are working really closely with ARCENT and Army Central has done a terrific job at trying to take this now and build it into that detection capability. So we had the initial investment, got this thing off the ground, and now the Army is incorporating it into the Red Sands Integrated Experimentation Center which is their experimentation s=center run in conjunction with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to test out new technologies. We've done tests in South Carolina where we've got people going out and trying to see how good is this application.

You can also take that same logic, by the way, and put it into like base defense cameras. So now they can start to detect things and see them much farther than the naked eye could. You



Grynkewich - 10/4/23

don't just have a human being looking at a camera, you've got robots looking at the camera with computer vision and detecting things.

So there's some exciting technologies like that that I think will play out. We're not at the point yet where we can scale that and share it with the broad public but we're working on that. I think that will be the next step.

**Moderator:** Whoever named it Karpe Drone obviously went to the Air Force Academy. [Laughter]. Most of these systems take their names from Marvel comics -- [Laughter]. So Karpe Drone is awesome.

The next question is Michael Marrow of Breaking Defense.

**DWG:** Good morning.

I want to follow up on Replicator. Could you expand more on how you're supporting that, how you're hoping that Replicator will support your operations. Like are there specific candidates that you're hoping to see scale?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Good question.

This kind of goes back to a point I was going to make earlier but I stopped before I did.

One of the ways that we're trying to focus on our partnerships in the region is through things like Task Force 99 but innovation efforts that we have going on. So we have a number of different partners that are participating with us in this collaborative space as we start to build out these capabilities. So Task Force 99 is actually a combined task force with five other nations that are participating in it and several others that I think will come on board in the next several months.

As we look at different technologies in conjunction with our

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

partners, things that solve their particular problems, our problems, their problems, one of the things that Task Force 99 can do, it does a really good job of surveying the innovative space for technologies, bringing them into a realistic combat environment, austere environment, a hot environment, a humid environment, and testing them. Concepts of operation to use them, as I discussed in my answer to Chris. But getting them from that next step where we need to scale is a little bit difficult. Task Force 99 is a very small organization, think 15-ish people. It doesn't have the ability right now to scale to operate thousands of these capabilities.

I think what Replicator will do is help us make that shift. It will help us understand a couple of different sides of this. One is going to be the production side of it. Can companies that are offering these off-the-shelf scale production to meet our requirements? And what would that look like?

Then we'll also learn what kind of training do we need to do? What kind of airmen do we need operating these systems? As an example, there are no, there are one or two traditional Air Force operators, pilots, navigators, et cetera, that are in Task Force 99. Most of the people in there who are flying those drones every day are like young sergeants who are communicators or cyber operators or engineers or something like that. They just happened to be the right people with the right skills that we discovered knew how to code or knew how to 3D print or something.

So there's going to be a whole different training regimen that comes with that once we start scaling through something like Replicator. There will be new doctrine, there will be new -- how do you force present this capability? How do you make sure that you don't create a unit that operates say that drone I was describing, the \$2500 one, Kestrel. You don't want a unit that's a Kestrel unit, you want a unit that is a drone unit that Kestrel might work for a little bit, but then you dispose of it and come up with the next thing. How do you even build that

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

into our DNA, in our overall organizational architecture? I think those are a lot of the things that we'll learn as we go through this.

**DWG:** To follow up on, you talked about Russian behavior maybe getting a little bit better in Syria, but a lot of constant activity. Can you expand on why that is? Has CENTCOM's name and shame strategy been effective? What do you think has been part of their calculus?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** It's a good question. I can't speak to what their calculus is, but I can talk to the correlations that we've seen.

We did see after we publicized some of their more egregious behavior that that behavior modified. So my statement has always been I think the Russians, when I was a young pilot and I was worried about the Soviet Union, if you will, or Russia right after the Soviet Union, and that was where our focus was, the Russian Federation Air Force was something that you respected. They were a professional Air Force. It's good to see them return more towards that professional level of behavior in Syria, I would argue. And maybe that had an effect, maybe it didn't, but it certainly correlated to change in their behavior.

I also think Russia has a lot going on right now, so to the extent that they want to have another problem on their hands in another theater that they're worried about, I'd be suspect that that is one of their objectives. We certainly don't think that they want any kind of escalation in Syria. We don't want any kind of escalation in Syria. So it could just be kind of a natural playing out of the sine wave of behavior.

**DWG:** A follow up on Replicator. First, the FAA came out with a memo last week warning about GPS moving along the Iran border in Iraq and the Caucasus, and there's been other reports of flight crews, commercial flight crews noticing simultaneous failures of their [inaudible] references.

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

Have you seen that with any of your aircraft in those theaters? And where do you think it's coming from? And what can be done about it?

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** I think the way I would describe it, my assessment is that the airspace in CENTCOM, particularly if you get into some of the areas like Syria. Not necessarily the areas round Iran that you're talking about. It's some of the most contested electromagnetic spectrum in the world if not the most contested. I would say based on that we've absolutely seen effects where there's been electromagnetic interference, potentially jamming, that happens with GPS, it happens with communications in a number of different ways.

So we see it. We've got obviously, depending on the platform that is operating, we've got a variety of tactics, techniques and procedures to mitigate it, whether it's changing a frequency or changing an altitude or operating a different antenna for a GPS. But we absolutely see that contest for the spectrum playing out in real time.

As far as who's doing it, it's really hard to establish attribution. In Syria in particular with a number of actors that are there, there's probably a lot of people that are doing it would be my overall assessment. But the closer you get to Iran the more clear it is to me that it's probably the Iranians who are responsible for that. What particular element of Iran, I wouldn't be sure.

**DWG:** On Replicator real quick. Last week the Hudson Institute came out with a paper, I don't know if you saw it, [Inaudible] Military which suggested that Replicator could be used as a mechanism for giving the combatant commands their own train and equip function outside of the military services. Is that something you would welcome? Do you think that the Replicator is a way to do that?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** That's a really interesting question and this kind of gets more into Alex Grynkewich's opinion than my job as the AFCENT Commander. But I guess what I would say is in a way that's what we're doing, is we organized Task Force 99 on our own. That wasn't presented by the Air Force to us. We created it internal to AFCENT. And we're equipping it on our own. So I think there is a role for that.

What I would really say is there's probably a balance between where the combatant commands think or should be thinking and where the services think. Traditionally we've talked about combatant commands look short term, services look longer term. My thought is it would be a more powerful system if the services thought a little bit more short term because there's opportunities in that short term space that we're identifying with things like Task Force 99 that services might be able to take advantage of to present to other combatant commands.

As an example, if we get a capability in Task Force 99 that scales really well, wouldn't that be neat to get it to INDO-PACOM? We're not thinking of this as something that's just applicable to AFCENT.

Conversely, if combatant commands think a little bit longer term, you build something that's maybe a little bit more sustainable as you build something like Task Force 99.

So I think there's some shared space there. It will take some experimentation and moving back and forth to figure out where that overlap is best purposed.

**Moderator:** We're within the five minute mark. There's always more questions than there is time, so before I turn the floor to you for final comments, I thank everyone for coming. Great questions. I thank you, sir, and your staff for a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion.

Any wrap-up comments, sir?

Grynkewich - 10/4/23

**Lt. Gen. Grynkewich:** Thanks. I'll finish where I started which is first by saying thank you. I appreciate you all having an interest in what we're doing in AFCENT and in US Central Command. As I mentioned, I think it's a very important region of the world and I think, the sound bite I would use is the central region is central to strategic competition. That strategic competition plays out in a number of ways we've discussed here today.

Because we find ourselves in the situation we're in, where we are rightly as a nation prioritizing things in the Indo-Pacific, we are looking at applying innovative solutions and innovative technologies to solve some of our hardest problems and that is where Task Force 99 comes in.

It's not just limited to that. We are undergoing a broad transformation to become more data centric, more digital at the headquarters level and our targeting enterprise across the board. So if you ever have the opportunity and you want to come see some of that work, I have an open invitation to you all to come out to either Qatar and IEB to see what our airmen are doing. It's truly impressive. Come out to the region and see some of them at our various bases over there and how they're contributing.

There's a lot of folks that are still operating in the Middle East. They're away from their families and they're doing absolutely fantastic work on a daily basis. I'm proud of what they do and encourage you to come out and take a look at it when you can. So thanks.

**Moderator:** Thank you, General. Thank you all very, very much.

# # # #